

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,—

There may be many people in this country who have formed the impression that Catholic France has shown itself to be reactionary, defeatist, and anti-British; who believe, in short, that Catholic France is adequately represented by Marshal Pétain. Such opinions should be controverted from the start. I cannot expect that any defence of Catholic and Christian France will be admitted by those who maintain that the English Church, and for the matter of that the Roman Church in Britain and all the other Churches, are dominated by reactionary laymen and still more reactionary clergy. But perhaps those who are aware of the variety of social views held by church people in Britain, will be disposed to credit the existence of some variety in France, a nation amongst whom much greater extremes of political opinion have been wont to flourish, and with a more violent animosity, than is usual here.

FRENCH WORKMEN AND FRENCH INTELLECTUALS

I have no private source of information about recent events in France, and public information is meagre. But the temper of the French people, and their divisions, cannot have changed completely in a few weeks' time; furthermore, the events of this summer have been prepared, as we can see in retrospect, by the events of the last twenty years and more. There has indeed always, been an extreme right-wing Catholicism, but also a Catholicism of the people—the latter on the whole democratic and republican in sentiment, but not, of course, Communistic. For the Catholicism of the people, Miss Barbara Ward, in a well-informed article in the August number of *The Christian Democrat* (published by the Catholic Social Guild, Oxford: subscription 3s. per annum) makes a point of great importance: the fact that Catholic allegiance is strongest, not so much among the agricultural peasantry, the heirs of the French Revolution, who, especially in the South-West, tend to a free-thinking radicalism tinged with a cynical scepticism, but among the industrial workers. The latter, of course, are most thickly settled in the North-East: it is, therefore, the more Catholic part of France which is under the German heel. It is among these industrial groups—extending into Belgium—that such beneficent popular religious organisations as “J.O.C.” (the *Jocistes*, or *Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique*) have taken root. (About the J.O.C. a pamphlet has been published by the S.P.C.K.: *Jocism*, by G. W. O. Addleshaw, 6d.) The intellectual expression of Christianity allied with progressive social views has appeared in the pages of *Esprit* and several other Christian but not clerical periodicals: *Esprit*, at least, was still being published quite recently. Such reviews debated freely matters of Christian sociology, and deserved the attention of all Christian reformers in other countries.

As for the Catholicism of the Right, the term comprehends more variety of tendencies and backgrounds than Miss Ward, in the article cited above, succeeds in

making us realise. She speaks of it as having found a vehicle of expression in the *Action Française* (a name which refers both to a political movement and to the daily newspaper by which it has been propagated). But the chief figure in this group was Charles Maurras: a middle-class, meridional, free-thinking man of letters. As a prose stylist Maurras is unquestionably a master, and deserved his election to the *Académie Française*; as a political thinker he has made, in his time, considerable contributions: but as a stylist he was the disciple of Voltaire, Renan and Anatole France; as a political thinker he was the disciple of the positivist Auguste Comte rather than of Catholics like Bonald and Joseph de Maistre. Maurras—who now, I hear, supports the Pétain régime—is a man of powerful but narrow mind, who used to hate Germany, dislike (unless my suspicions were wrong) England; and who, because of his southern Provençal origins, was strongly pro-Italian in the dubious cause of “Latin Mediterranean culture.” Like most of his group, he was ill-informed on foreign affairs; and he did not know enough of England to understand either the good or bad of British policy. The one man in his group with some understanding of foreign affairs was Jacques Bainville, a writer of brilliant and lucid mind, whose early death is much to be regretted, but who was, like Maurras, a free-thinker and a product of the post-Revolution bourgeoisie.

The attitude of Maurras towards the Church was simple: he made no pretence of Christian belief, but supported the Church as a social institution making for stability. How many of the hereditary Catholics, of the old families, he was able to attract I do not know. At the time when I was personally acquainted with him and with his entourage, I think that his following was more from the middle and lower middle classes. He waged, it is true, an incessant journalistic battle against political corruption—somewhat indiscriminately and with excessive violence. The more pious of the royalist aristocracy may have hesitated to associate themselves with this outspoken agnostic who made no bones about his lack of faith. He, on the other hand, with honest naïvety, could see no reason why Catholics could not support him if he supported them; and when his movement was condemned, and his newspaper put on the Index, by Pius XI in 1927, I am sure that he was genuinely surprised. (The interdict has since been lifted, on the basis, I believe, of certain assurances given; but he has never attracted back to him such uncompromising Catholics as Jacques Maritain and Georges Bernanos.) In imposing his censure, the Pope was doing more than simply reaffirming the policy of reconciliation with the Republic entered upon by Leo XIII: he was condemning a heresy which asserted that only one form of government, the monarchical, was compatible with Catholicism. Perhaps also condemning a dangerous intolerance which classified Jews, Protestants and Freemasons in one comprehensive condemnation. I defended the *Action Française* when it was put upon the Index; my *particular* defence may or may not stand; but I believe now that the Pope understood its tendencies better. There was reason for dissatisfaction with the paper on secular grounds as well: not only its unsatisfactory treatment of foreign affairs, but its lack of appreciation of the importance of economics.

THE DIVERSITY OF FRENCH OPINION

The *Action Française* is a middle-class movement of men of post-Revolution mentality. Until recent times, however, it held itself apart from explicitly Fascist movements such as the *Croix de Feu*. But my reason for writing of it at such length is that the “extreme Right” is a term which includes at least three elements: the aristocratic families which have remained Catholic, and overlapping with them the mili-

tary families; a certain number of middle-class ideologues, either non-Catholic or neo-Catholic; and finally quite a distinct lot, such financiers and large industrialists as calculate that their bread is buttered on that side. It certainly includes a number of ecclesiastics—but French ecclesiastics differ in their views just as do ordinary men and English ecclesiastics. There are no doubt many Catholics who are quite disinterested and honestly mistaken, who will have leisure to repent later of a sympathy for Italy which has only helped to put their country into the power of Germany: in a time of such political confusion there is every excuse for an honest mistake. But opinion is very diverse, and for this diversity we may call as evidence the great difference between Catholics about the war in Spain. A group of the Right (including several of the hierarchy) issued a manifesto in favour of Franco; the Communists, together with some Liberals, supported a declaration in favour of the Republic; but a group of the most eminent Catholics, including Maritain and François Mauriac (and including, if my memory is not at fault, several Protestants also) issued a statement of admirable fairness and Christian charity, which earned them the displeasure of both Right and Left. We must not forget, either, those great Catholic writers, such as Charles Péguy and Léon Bloy, who have united a fervent devotion to a passion for social justice; or the admirable work in theology and Christian philosophy which France has produced in the last twenty years, such as the devotional studies of Père Garrigou-Lagrange and the sociological work of Père Lallemand. The Church in France is better represented by these scholars, and by the *Jociste* workers under the German oppression, than by a few distinguished military men who, we must believe, have been honourably deluded.

THE CONTRAST WITH BRITAIN

I have left myself little space for drawing the comparison which suggests itself. We owe it to our Ally to try to understand her strength and weakness, and need this understanding if we are to contribute to the future shape of Europe. And we owe it to ourselves because it will help us to appraise our own situation. There is in this country no parallel as yet to the violence and extremity of the political divisions in France—divisions which have temporarily cancelled, but cannot extirpate, French patriotism. There is in this country a more solid basis for unity in patriotism; those who need reassurance on this point should read an article by Mr. J. B. Priestley, whose broadcast talks have done so much to make articulate our faith in the actual, and our hope for the new Britain, in the August *World Review*. It is a unity in which the term "Christian" does not excite faction; but though more unified, we cannot pride ourselves that we are more "Christian" as a nation than are the French Christians as a part of a nation. It is a unity in which, I believe, there is more common willingness for sacrifice and for social change than we give ourselves credit for. But the unity which has affirmed itself in war may easily disintegrate in peace; and for peace it will need the element of a more conscious, united and intrepid body of Christian thought and practice than it can yet boast.

THE CHURCH IN COUNTRY PARISHES

I should like to call attention to *The Church in Country Parishes* (S.P.C.K., 2s.), the report of a committee appointed in June, 1939, by the Bishop of Winchester and chosen therefore from clergy and laity of his diocese. The Bishop's initiative might well give an impulse to the preparation of similar reports in other dioceses. We are glad to see that the recommended reading recognises the agricultural studies of Sir George Stapledon: the book of Lord Northbourne, *Look to the Land*, is probably too recent to have been known before this report went to press. The terms of reference

of such a report are very difficult to define, and the recommendations are limited to what the clergy can do under present conditions ; but the intelligent reader can perceive some of the wider vista of social questions which is opened. The question, for instance, of the difficulty of country clergy in giving their children as good an education as they have had themselves, is touched upon, and obviously raises other questions, of social status, clerical stipends, and the whole basis of class education in a changing society. The plea that agriculture should be regarded as a vocation, not merely as an industry, is one with which we are warmly in sympathy, but it obviously involves the whole orientation and scheme of values of our future society. Such problems are obviously outside of the scope of such a report: but there is one problem which I wish might have been raised, even though no local committee could be expected to get very far towards a solution. That is the question of whether the preliminary training of clergy for country work should differ in any way from that of clergy for urban or suburban areas. Nothing is said, either, about the possible usefulness of religious communities in country districts. Nevertheless, the report is very good within its limits and worth the study of everyone concerned with this vital subject.

NEWS FROM EASTERN EUROPE

From the "International Christian Press and Information Service" (July): "By the cession of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the U.S.S.R., the Orthodox Church loses a vast field of activity. At this moment, when the Press is announcing riots, the burning of the Cathedral of Cernauti, and the tragic fate of the clergy, we would recall that two of the three seminaries of Orthodox Theology in Rumania are situated at Cernauti and Kichinov. These seminaries have played a great part in the life of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, even beyond the frontiers of Rumania."

The same issue of this publication quotes a moving appeal by the Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Estonia to the Estonian people; and informs us that, on the island of Oesal, where the Russians are at present constructing naval bases, the church has been sold by auction. It was sold for 605 crowns to a man who intends to turn it into a saw-mill, which will be used in the building of Russian barracks.

POSTSCRIPT

I regret that pressure of other work has made it impossible for me to answer all the personal letters which call for an answer ; but I hope, after the Editor's return, to be able to deal gradually with some of this correspondence.

Yours sincerely,

T. S. Eliot

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